

VZCZCXRO9117  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHGB #0699/01 0691357  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH ZDK  
P 091357Z MAR 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6138  
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000699

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/2018

TAGS: PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: PRT WASIT: WASIT'S MODERATE ALTERNATIVES

BAGHDAD 00000699 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Wade Weems for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Wasit reporting cable.

¶2. (C) Summary. Poor performance from elected representatives and the likely demise of the closed list system may open the door a crack to Wasit independents. At least three small self-described &technocrat8 groups are seeking to organize, educate voters and encourage independent candidates, but remain far from being able to compete with established parties. End summary.

¶3. (C) PRT Team Leader (TL) met Feb 6 with Hajji Fawzi al-Bakiri, who, despite his position as head of Wasit's Shi'a Endowment, comes across as a secularist intent on revamping the dodgy politics of his province. In recent meetings with PRT, Bakiri has verged on disconsolate at the political situation in Wasit, where voters who &don't know what they are voting for8 have been misled into electing religious parties. &The parties mislead the people, and nobody opposes them.<sup>8</sup>

¶4. (C) Bakiri is trying to advance his brand of technocratic political leadership through a group (&al Wasatioun,<sup>8</sup> or &People of Wasit<sup>8</sup>) of local professionals. A copy of the group's charter, provided to PRT, calls for &creating a political culture with a democratic foundation;<sup>8</sup> working to ensure that government is not &an instrument of abuse and private benefit;<sup>8</sup> raising awareness of civil, political, human, and women's rights; and seeking to support candidates for provincial office based on education, ethical considerations, and administrative competence. With elections approaching, Bakiri wants to get the word out with TV appearances, posters, and possibly a specialized newspaper that will publish until elections occur. His message to voters: &Use your brain before you give your vote to someone. Vote for the person, not the party.<sup>8</sup>

¶5. (C) Bakiri has given a subset of his group a religious sounding name, the Independent Hussayn Gathering (Taggamu Hussaynaya al Mustakil). He explained the reference to the martyr Hussayn is meant to connote sacrifice for the greater good. Bakiri also spoke approvingly of a larger group of like-minded Wasit professionals seeking to organize under the name &The Independent Rescue Committee<sup>8</sup> (al Inkat al Moustakeel). On February 14, PRT met with Dr. Magid al Taee, the veterinarian who leads the committee. His elevator speech: &We provide municipal services. We have integrity. We offer leadership. We need to fight corruption. Nobody is above the law.<sup>8</sup>

¶6. (C) Magid is highly critical of Wasit's political culture, describing the governor as a former &rubbish peddler.<sup>8</sup> Citing public opinion research, he evinces widespread dissatisfaction with political parties and elected

officials, but also notes skepticism about the role of the Marja,iyah, who endorsed the list (list 221) that ultimately swept Wasit,s PC elections. &Three years ago, people went to the polls with their eyes closed, and voted for the religious parties.<sup>8</sup> Magid recounted a recent visit to a remote Wasit village. Referring to the practice whereby a request must be granted when one sets down the agal on his headdress, Magid says the villagers told him, &Even if you set down the turban of Sistani, I am going to keep my eyes open.<sup>8</sup>

¶7. (C) None of this has prevented him from seeking the blessing, or at least non-interference, of Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani. Magid told PRT that he met briefly with Sistani, and at greater length with Mohammed Reda al Sistani, the Ayatollah,s son, who told him that the Marja,iyah will not get involved in elections or with telling the people how to vote.

¶8. (C) Magid is vague about numbers but says he regularly packs a large room with members. Pressed for an example of a political party or leader he saw himself following, Magid referenced former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, but without enthusiasm. Acknowledging a lack of financial support, a particular handicap when he asserts that other Wasit parties receive support from Iran, Magid says funding is only one of three elements of a successful campaign, the other two being people and time. &We can work on money. But we are strong on the others.<sup>8</sup>

¶9. (C) More recently, PRT met March 2 with four of the 17 founders of a self-described &technocrat<sup>8</sup> NGO based in Suwayrah. The Imam Sajjid Charitable Organization of Suwayrah (Jammiiyah al Imam al Sajjid Khayraiah al Moustakeel) claims to have provided voter education for around 100,000 Wasatians during the 2005 elections, mainly an effort at convincing voters to vote their conscience.

BAGHDAD 00000699 002 OF 002

¶10. (C) All four described themselves as apolitical. &We stay away from politics,<sup>8</sup> said Hussayn Ali Azouz, their leader, and all present registered their disgust with the current Suwayrah Local Council and the Provincial Council. Yet, when asked what they would do if someone suggested they field a candidate, Hussayn replied, to general head nodding: &Well, of course -- we will run!<sup>8</sup> (Comment: It seems that running as an independent is not viewed per se as being involved in politics. End Comment.) When asked how a small group like Imam Sajjid could build an organization to compete with established parties, which control ministries and dispense charity and patronage jobs in quantity, members described deliberate organization building efforts. Kareem Muwati Kareem, an articulate and intelligent officer of the organization, gave as examples a doctor seeing a patient for free, or an attorney helping an individual shepherd a matter through difficult bureaucratic maze.

¶11. (C) Comment: Bakiri is an energetic and articulate spokesman for liberal democratic ideals within a distinctly Iraqi framework. He numbers his core supporters at 20 -- small numbers even for Wasit. Magid,s oratory is less soaring, and he is poorly financed, but his organization is larger and he apparently has been deemed enough of a comer to merit an audience, however brief, with Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani. Suwayrah,s experience suggests that &technocrat<sup>8</sup> groups may be mimicking established parties. It remains to be seen whether their groups, efforts to advance an alternative to the religiously based parties will dovetail with popular disaffection with incumbents--and the desire by Wasit voters to support candidates known to them either personally or by reputation. End Comment.

CROCKER